

Name: _____ Class: _____

Before Rosa Parks, There Was Claudette Colvin

 By Margot Adler
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Rosa Parks is well-known for her refusal to give up her seat to a white person on a bus in Alabama. A famous bus boycott followed because of her act of protest. However, Parks was not the first person to refuse to give up her seat. In this informational text, Margot Adler discusses the lesser known actions of Claudette Colvin and why her activism has gone unnoticed in comparison to Parks. As you read, take notes on what inspired Claudette Colvin's actions and how leaders of the Civil Rights Movement responded.

[1] Few people know the story of Claudette Colvin: When she was 15, she refused to move to the back of the bus and give up her seat to a white person — nine months before Rosa Parks did the very same thing.

Most people know about Parks and the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott¹ that began in 1955, but few know that there were a number of women who refused to give up their seats on the same bus system. Most of the women were quietly fined, and no one heard much more.

Colvin was the first to really challenge the law.

Now a 69-year-old retiree, Colvin lives in the Bronx. She remembers taking the bus home from high school on March 2, 1955, as clear as if it were yesterday.

[5] The bus driver ordered her to get up and she refused, saying she'd paid her fare and it was her constitutional right. Two police officers put her in handcuffs and arrested her. Her school books went flying off her lap.

"All I remember is that I was not going to walk off the bus voluntarily," Colvin says.

It was Negro history month, and at her segregated school they had been studying black leaders like Harriet Tubman, the runaway slave who led more than 70 slaves to freedom through the network of safe houses known as the Underground Railroad. They were also studying about Sojourner Truth, a former slave who became an abolitionist² and women's rights activist.



"Claudette Colvin" by The Visibility Project, Claudette Colvin is in the public domain.

1. **Boycott (noun):** the refusal to have dealings with a person or organization as a means of protest
 2. a person who advocated or supported ending slavery

The class had also been talking about the injustices they were experiencing daily under the Jim Crow³ segregation laws, like not being able to eat at a lunch counter.

"We couldn't try on clothes," Colvin says. "You had to take a brown paper bag and draw a diagram of your foot... and take it to the store. Can you imagine all of that in my mind? My head was just too full of black history, you know, the oppression⁴ that we went through. It felt like Sojourner Truth was on one side pushing me down, and Harriet Tubman was on the other side of me pushing me down. I couldn't get up."

[10] Colvin also remembers the moment the jail door closed. It was just like a Western movie, she says.

"And then I got scared, and panic came over me, and I started crying. Then I started saying the Lord's Prayer," she says.

'Twice Toward Justice'

Now her story is the subject of a new book, *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice*.

Author Phil Hoose says that despite a few articles about her in the Birmingham press and in USA Today, and brief mentions in some books about the civil rights movement, most people don't know about the role Colvin played in the bus boycotts.

Hoose couldn't get over the teenager's actions, nine months before Rosa Parks, "in the same city, in the same bus system, with very tough consequences, hauled off the bus, handcuffed, jailed and nobody really knew about it."

[15] He also believes Colvin is important because she challenged the law in court, one of four women plaintiffs in *Browder v. Gayle*, the court case that successfully overturned bus segregation laws in Montgomery and Alabama.

There are many reasons why Claudette Colvin has been pretty much forgotten. She hardly ever told her story when she moved to New York City. In her new community, hardly anyone was talking about integration; instead, most people were talking about black enterprises, black power⁵ and Malcolm X.⁶

When asked why she is little known and why everyone thinks only of Rosa Parks, Colvin says the NAACP⁷ and all the other black organizations felt Parks would be a good icon because "she was an adult. They didn't think teenagers would be reliable."

She also says Parks had the right hair and the right look.

"Her skin texture was the kind that people associate with the middle class," says Colvin. "She fit that profile."

3. state and local laws that enforced racial segregation in the South

4. **Oppression** (*noun*): prolonged, cruel, and unjust treatment or control

5. a movement emphasizing racial pride and the creation of black political and cultural institutions

6. an African American Muslim minister and human rights activist

7. the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, founded in 1909

[20] David Garrow, a historian and the author of *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, says people may think that Parks' action was spontaneous, but black civic leaders had been thinking about what to do about the Montgomery buses for years.

After Colvin's arrest, she found herself shunned⁸ by parts of her community. She experienced various difficulties and became pregnant. Civil rights leaders felt she was an inappropriate symbol for a test case.

Parks was the secretary of the NAACP. She was well-known and respected and, says Garrow, Parks had a "natural gravitas"⁹ and was an "inherently impressive person."

At the same time, Garrow believes attention to Colvin is a healthy corrective, because "the real reality of the movement was often young people and often more than 50 percent women." The images you most often see are men in suits.

Hoosoe says he believes Colvin understands the pragmatism¹⁰ that pushed Parks to the fore,¹¹ but "on the other hand, she did it."

[25] Hoosoe says the stories of Parks and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. are wonderful, but those are the stories of people in their 30s and 40s. Colvin was 15. Hoosoe feels his book will bring a fresh teen's perspective to the struggle to end segregation.

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8. **Shun (verb):** to avoid something (or someone) out of fear or dislike
9. dignity; seriousness
10. practical attitude or policy
11. to the front

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best describes the central idea of the text?
 - A. While Claudette Colvin was one of the first women to refuse to give up her seat on the bus, her young age also made her an unreliable activist in the movement.
 - B. Claudette Colvin feared that she would get in further trouble for resisting racism, so she kept her brave actions a secret for most of her life.
 - C. Claudette Colvin, like many women during the Civil Rights Movement, was denied recognition for her heroic actions because of her gender.
 - D. Claudette Colvin challenged segregation on buses, but she didn't become famous because civil rights groups didn't think she was the right face for the movement.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "She hardly ever told her story when she moved to New York City. In her new community, hardly anyone was talking about integration" (Paragraph 16)
 - B. "Colvin says the NAACP and all the other black organizations felt Parks would be a good icon because 'she was an adult. They didn't think teenagers would be reliable.'" (Paragraph 17)
 - C. "After Colvin's arrest, she found herself shunned by parts of her community. She experienced various difficulties and became pregnant." (Paragraph 21)
 - D. "'the real reality of the movement was often young people and often more than 50 percent women.' The images you most often see are men in suits." (Paragraph 23)

3. PART A: How did Colvin's actions compare to Parks' actions?
 - A. Claudette Colvin's actions were more violent in her refusal to give up her seat than Rosa Parks' were.
 - B. Claudette Colvin's actions were a sign of active resistance, while Rosa Parks merely didn't want to move after a long day.
 - C. Claudette Colvin and Rosa Parks both challenged segregation, but Rosa Parks' resistance was used as a symbol for a movement.
 - D. Claudette Colvin and Rosa Parks did not intend to start revolutions when they decided not to give up their seats on the bus.

4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Most people know about Parks and the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott... but few know that there were a number of women who refused to give up their seats on the same bus system." (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "Two police officers put her in handcuffs and arrested her. Her school books went flying off her lap." (Paragraph 5)
 - C. "Can you imagine all of that in my mind? My head was just too full of black history, you know, the oppression that we went through." (Paragraph 9)
 - D. "'And then I got scared, and panic come over me, and I started crying. Then I started saying the Lord's Prayer,' she says." (Paragraph 11)

5. What evidence does the author provide for why Claudette Colvin's actions remain little known today?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. How does the text explore America's shifting views on the Civil Rights Movement? Why do you think Claudette Colvin is being discussed more today than she was during the movement? Why do you think it's important to remember lesser known civil rights activists?
2. How did Claudette Colvin create change, despite going largely unacknowledged by civil rights groups? How do you think Colvin's show of resistance contributed to the Civil Rights Movement?
3. How does the text explore the discrimination that Claudette Colvin experienced within the Civil Rights Movement? Have you ever experienced discrimination because of your age? Describe the experience.
4. How did Claudette Colvin's social status contribute to why civil rights groups didn't use her actions to inspire the bus boycott? Has your social status ever influenced the way people treat you? If so, describe the experience.